

*Slam* by Nick Hornby (Penguin) R110

*Gods Behaving Badly* by Marie Phillips (Jonathan Cape) R192

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All that these novels have in common, apart from ending up on the reviewer's desk at the same time, is that they are contemporary novels set in North London. They are also both about as demanding as eating peanuts, and about as rewarding. They are, in short, easy reading leisure-lit, custom-made to be read on the Tube.

Of the two, *Slam* is the more substantial. Hornby's previous novels, *About a Boy*, *High Fidelity* and *Fever Pitch*, have all been successfully filmed, and Johnny Depp has bought the film rights to Hornby's last, *A Long Way Down*. This is to say that Hornby spins a good yarn, creates believable and likeable characters and is, as they say, eminently bankable.

*Slam* is no exception to this recipe, although it is billed as Hornby's first teen novel.

Where *About a Boy* gave us childhood as seen from a (nominally) adult perspective, here we have adulthood as seen from a teen perspective; indeed, adulthood as inflicted upon a teen perspective, as sixteen-year old Sam Jones discovers he's got his girl friend, Alicia, pregnant. His own mother is thirty-two – it doesn't take a mathematical genius to figure out that she was fifteen when she fell pregnant. "Jesus Christ," as Alicia's snobbish father exclaims in exasperation, "don't you people ever learn anything?"

The novel is really about what Sam does learn. He learns that adults are not necessarily any better than children at running their lives (this is not news to Hornby readers). He learns that having a kid at sixteen needn't mess up your life, but it sure does complicate it. He learns that it's possible to have sex before one is competent to have a relationship. He learns to use three condoms in future.

In all of this he is helped, if not always very tactfully, by the adults around him. His mother at about this stage falls pregnant herself by a new boy friend; Alicia's parents have issues of their own, but seem united in their reluctance to have Sam as a son-in-law. His father thinks it's a huge joke that he'll be able to play in the same football team as his grandson.

And then there's Tony Hawk, a.k.a. TH. If you don't know who Tony Hawk is, you may be better off with the other book under review; Sam (who narrates his own novel) tells us "Not knowing Tony Hawk is like not knowing Robbie Williams or maybe even Tony Blair." TH is, for the information of the fuddy-duddies, "the J.K. Rowling of skaters, the Big Mac, the iPod, the X-box." And a skater, for your information, grandma, is a skateboarder, not an ice skater.

Sam has a poster of TH to whom he addresses his perplexities; TH replies with (roughly) appropriate extracts from his book *Hawk – Occupation Skateboarder*. TH also on occasions transports Sam to the future, where, for instance, he has to change a nappy before he's learnt to do so. It's a bit much, really, unless teen readers are more tolerant of whimsy than I suspect they are.

Hornby treads a fine line between being cool and being responsible. He doesn't want his teen readers to think having a baby at sixteen is a great thing to do, but nor does he want to suggest that it's the kind of thing that happens only to slags and chavs. Thus, by the end of his novel, Sam settles down to some adult talk about having babies: "But there is such a thing as a right age, isn't there? And sixteen isn't it, even if you try to make the best of it when it's happened."

With Britain having, Sam tells us, the highest teen pregnancy rate in Europe, Hornby can be forgiven a slightly didactic conclusion. It might have carried more weight if the rest of the novel hadn't been so damn cute.

*Gods Behaving Badly* is a one-joke novel. The joke is this: the Olympian gods, having come down in the world, are shackled up together in a ramshackle house in North London, where they practise contemporary versions of their traditional roles. Apollo, the sun god and glamour boy of Olympus, is a serial seducer and seedy television personality; Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, does phone sex with mortals on her mobile phone (and ordinary sex with Apollo in the toilet); Artemis, goddess of hunting, is a dog walker, Dionysus runs a sleazy night club ... well, you get the joke. Into this ménage wander two gormless mortals, Neil and Alice, innocently and inarticulately in love with each other. Eros, he with the bow and arrow, causes Apollo to fall in love with Alice ... mayhem ensues, Zeus is dug up and persuaded to start hurling thunderbolts, Alice ends up dead and has to be retrieved from Hades (via the Angel tube station, from which the dead depart – another joke, except if you know the Angel tube station). But the gods being immortal they all do live happily ever after – well, they live ever after, at any rate.

Phillips, like Hornby, knows the look and feel of London, and she locates her Olympian cast firmly in contemporary reality. Unlike Hornby, she has no moral to offer her readers, other than not to mess with the gods – but we knew that from the Greeks anyway.